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Critics blast freeway plan to cut through S. Mountain

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Three cuts up to 20 stories high and more than two football fields wide would be carved through South Mountain if a proposed freeway is built along Pecos Road in Ahwatukee Foothills to connect with 55th Avenue in Laveen.

There's also talk of a possible tunnel or gigantic bridge, but state transportation officials say the most likely scenario is essentially creating a canyon to allow for a 10-lane freeway, five lanes in each direction.

The cuts under the proposed alignment for the South Mountain Freeway have gotten little notice compared with the high-profile private-property issues. Hundreds of homes would be demolished to make way for the freeway, and many residents are opposed to the alignment for that reason.

But environmentalists and park advocates are equally upset by the plan to bulldoze or bore through the South Mountain Preserve, the nation's largest municipal park with more than 16,000 acres.

"To some degree, all the mountains are sacred. It's a being of Mother Nature. Everything has life, and it doesn't make sense to blow her (the mountain) up, it doesn't make sense to build on her. It's just disrespectful," said Ginger Sunbird Martin, a member of the Gila River Indian Community and a cultural concierge with the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa.

The dramatic proposal is the first in decades to suggest blasting or cutting through a mountain in the Valley.

In the early 1990s, engineers blasted parts of the Phoenix Mountains Preserve to build a 2.27-mile extension of the Squaw Peak Parkway from Northern Avenue to Shea Boulevard. In the 1950s, state highway engineers also cut a tunnel through the edge of a mountain for U.S. 60 to Clifton-Morenci.

But carving a canyon out of South Mountain to build a freeway that would bypass downtown Phoenix is the most drastic measure, swallowing at least 32 areas of the park.

The Gila River Indian Community is opposed to the freeway being built on its land and has prevented the Arizona Department of Transportation from even studying the possibility of such an alignment. The stance that the mountain is sacred might be leveraged in shifting the alignment onto reservation land, but the Gila River community isn't talking, so the present route would cut across the three ridgelines.

"The key for us at looking at this option is to minimize the impacts or enhance access to the park," ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick said.

Brian Smith, an Ahwatukee Foothills resident and pilot for US Airways, said talk of such cuts into the mountainside shouldn't be minimized.

"I think it's being downplayed by ADOT," he said of the impact. "It's a severe impact

to the mountain and the park, and I think people would be outraged by it."

The Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway is envisioned as a 22-mile freeway that would link Interstate 10 in the southeast Valley with I-10 in the West Valley, bypassing downtown Phoenix. ADOT estimates the freeway's price tag at \$1.7 billion and its completion by late 2015.

The proposed alignment is along Pecos Road in Ahwatukee, cutting through the western edge of the South Mountain Preserve and along 55th Avenue in Laveen.

Last year, the Phoenix Parks and Recreation Board voted unanimously against allowing the proposed freeway to carve a canyon out of the mountain.

Diana Brooks, chairwoman of the board, said most members are adamant park supporters who foresee disastrous impacts to animals and plants should the freeway be built as planned.

In addition to the ridge cuts, two of which would be in the park, ADOT has considered building bridges over the mountain. But that option "honestly is not very possible because you'd need a bridge that would be 200 feet in the air," Burdick said.

The only other option, he said, is tunneling through the mountain. ADOT has been talking to engineers around the country about the possibility of a tunnel, which likely would substantially raise the freeway's price tag.

"We're talking to tunnel folks to determine whether or not that's technically possible, having to bore a path that's 10 lanes wide. Obviously, we'd have to make sure we have the structural integrity to do that," Burdick said.

Tunneling through the mountain, which also would require venting car exhaust, would cost an additional \$500 million or more to the project, he said.

"I guess tunneling would be better than cutting through it, but it's still virgin desert, it's still cutting through the flora and fauna," Brooks said. "Our preference still would be to look for another alternative."

ADOT is preparing an environmental impact statement that would spell out all the proposed freeway impacts, including those to air quality and wildlife habitat. The study is not expected to be finished until next year.

The final decision about if and where to build the freeway rests with the Maricopa Association of Governments and the Federal Highway Administration.

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